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Harper's Magazine Reprieve in Vietnam

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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REPRIEVE IN VIET NAM

One of the by-products of the struggle between communism and freedom is a kind of geographic schizophrenia in the Far East. On the fringes of communist power in Asia one finds a split Korea, a partitioned Viet Nam and two Chinas. In each case the division is regarded on both sides as temporary. Mao Tse-tung vows that he will take Formosa and Chiang Kai-shek reiterates that the nationalists will return to the Asian mainland. Syngman Rhee grows impatient to join the northern half of his country to the Republic of Korea and the communists in turn insist that sooner or later the Korean peninsula will be unified by them. Ho Chih Minh regards Viet Nam south of the 17th parallel as only temporarily out of his grasp. Ngo Dinh Diem is confident that eventually the country will be reunited under the free government which he now leads in Saigon.

With the possible exception of the Formosa-China split, it is reasonable to assume that these competitors are correct in regarding the various divisions as temporary. The partitions have occurred in

nations which are contiguous (again, excepting Formosa) and otherwise quite similar in race, culture, language and outlook. Although Korea, Viet Nam and China have been divided several times before in history invariably these centripetal forces have drawn them together again.

American policy at least towards Korea and Viet Nam has generally supported the concept of unification. It has also been a policy of negative preference, our principal concern being that these countries should not be unified by the Chinese communists, or those responsive to them. We have gone to great and expensive lengths to sustain this preference. To save Korea from communist unification we remobilized our armed forces, engaged ^a ~~in~~ large part of them on the distant battlefields of that peninsula and have spent billions of dollars to maintain the Republic under Syngman Rhee. To preserve Formosa from the same fate we have allocated enormous sums to the Chinese nationalists, stationed a fleet between the island and the mainland and even threatened

to go to war ourselves. In Viet Nam, we backed the French and non-communist

Viet Nameese allied with them with billions of dollars in aid. While we

have not actually committed ourselves to war to prevent communist

^{of Viet Nam,}
unification, it was not for want of official voices advocating such a course.

Since the defeat of the French Expeditionary Force in the great
battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, our policy in Viet Nam has supported

not merely anti-communism but ^a Vietnamese ^{leader} who ^{is} dedicated to

unifying Viet Nam on the basis of full national independence. While ^{in this sense}

our policy has ~~thus~~ become more positive, our activity in Viet Nam has

^{become}
~~been~~ more modest and so have our words. It is somewhat ironic

therefore that where we are doing the least ~~in the Far East~~, the

prospects for success are the best. Not only is there a good chance

of realizing the negative objective of preventing the communist

unification of Viet Nam, there is even the possibility of a positive

advance of freedom.

A key to this anomaly is to be found in the ^{2c} charter of the man

who now heads the free government of Viet Nam. ~~The nature of its~~

Leadership is a revealing index to the situation in any country. That

is the case, whether ^{it} ~~leadership~~ is regarded primarily as molding the

forces within a society ~~or~~ as giving them expression. There is a

difference in a United Kingdom headed by a Churchill and by an Eden.

A subtle change has taken place in the United States since leadership

passed to the team in the unfortunate incapacitation of the President.

It is difficult to envision the direction in which India might have

gone in the past quarter century without first a Gandhi and then a

Nehru and in that order.

In some respects, the leadership factor as a mold rather than

an expressor of the social forces in a country is more significant

in Asia than in the West at the present time. ↩

The recent shock of independence has left these countries

in a very amorphous state. They are nations turning on a kind of giant

potter's wheel. The fingers which shape them before the clay hardens will have much to do with their ultimate forms.

It is not by accident that elections in many Asian countries are being conducted with ballots which show the portraits of contesting candidates side by side. More than a technique of voting is involved; there is a certain symbolism. The voter tears the ballot apart, deposits his preference carefully in the box and casts the other into the dust.

If Viet Nam has not set in the communist mold as was almost universally expected a year or so ago, it is due in large part to the man who heads the free government in the southern half of the country. A year ago Ngo Dinh Diem was a lonely figure in Saigon. He had been brought back from self-imposed exile abroad to serve as President when the Communist tide in Viet Nam was at its ^{height.} ~~highest~~. He inherited a government in chaos, run by a coalition whose only claim^g to authority

were ~~their~~ guns and ~~their~~ influence with the Ex-Emperor Bao Dai. It

was composed of the gangsters, and ex-river pirates of the Binh

Xuyen semi-secret organization, the mystical quasi-religious sects

of the countryside known as the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai and by colonial

~~hacks and~~ hangers-on. The demoralized Vietnamese army was a

separate force, with a chief-of-staff nourishing expectations of

establishing a military ^{Satrapy} ~~America~~ in south Viet Nam. This weird

conglomeration was held grimly together by the French Ministry for

the Associated States ^{in Paris} and the French Expeditionary Corps ^{based on Saigon.} Bao Dai,

who bore the title of Chief of State served as the instrumentality ^{of cohesion,} issuing

orders and edicts from Cannes on the French Riviera.

While the various elements of power alternately vied and
cooperated with each other in the struggle for power in Saigon, the
Communist Viet Minh under Ho Chih Minh strengthened their grip
on the country. The Geneva truce had consigned the northern half
of the country to the Viet Minh and they promptly fastened on it an

authoritarian regime modeled after that of Communist China. Below the 17th parallel, underground Communist cadres and organizers were the real power in much of the countryside. They were the government even where officials nominally responsive to Saigon sat in the provincial and local offices. The people accepted Communist leadership partly in terror but mostly because there was no real Vietnamese alternative in Saigon.

In the jungle of colonial decay, corruption and military defeat which characterized Saigon in 1954, Diem assumed the presidency with few assets other than his nationalism, his personal incorruptability and courage and his idealistic determination to create a free Viet Nam. In addition, he had some cautious support from the American Embassy, the gratitude of several hundred thousand poverty-stricken refugees whom he had insisted upon evacuating from the communist north, and the sympathy of a few small Vietnamese nationalist organizations.

Diem found few allies among the French and Vietnamese officials and military officers who crowded into Saigon in the wake of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The Army leaders ignored his directives and constantly threatened him with rebellion. When Diem showed his opposition to corruption the Binh Xuyen tossed warning bombs into his residence. Colonial hacks, with straight faces, found him "unpopular".

French colons complained of his "stubbornness" and "inexperience".

When Diem indicated an intention of extending
~~There were signs that upon~~ the authority of the Saigon

government ~~might be extended~~ into the south Vietnamese country side, the Hoa Hao and Cao Daist sects branished their independent armed bands at the upstart in Saigon who threatened their rights. The "rights," it might be noted were government subsidies and autonomous control of large areas of the countryside. In these areas the sects had the unchallenged privilege of exploiting the inhabitants in return for "protection", mystical quasi-religious services and anti-communism.

Diem constituted a threat to all these special interests - ^{the army, and racketeers,} the sects, ^{the}

colonial bureaucracy, ~~the Binh Xuyen racketeers~~ and the ~~sects~~, ^{politicians}

~~political leaders~~ allied with Bao Dai. Their reaction ^{to the threat} took the form

of subversion of his constructive program by inertia, outright

opposition and conspiracy to bring about his removal. The not very

remote danger of the Viet Minh seemed to concern them far less

than the immediate ^{danger} ~~threat~~ of Diem. *Some seemed to believe that life with the communists would be easier than with the new President.*

In Saigon, in the fall of 1954, the tea-cup gossip measured ~~his~~ Diem's

political career, if not his life, in days and even hours, ^{however,} ~~but~~ Diem acted

as though it would last forever. Outside the Palace of Independence, ^{in which} *he sat with eastern passivity,* the clamor of opposition rose. The more ^{Diem} ~~he~~ ignored it, the more

furious it became.

He was critized abroad for doing nothing and at home for doing too much. Actually, he was doing the only thing he could do. He was maneuvering to free himself from the web of corruption and

decadence and the vestiges of a ~~dying~~ ^{control} colonial ~~ism~~ in which he had been enmeshed from the moment he assumed the Presidency. He was attempting to separate and dissolve the strands of this web which stretched from Paris and Cannes to Saigon and into the Vietnamese provinces. He used his meager resources with great political skill to accomplish this purpose.

Actually each core of Diem's opposition in 1954 was a part of the bankrupt legacy which he inherited when he assumed the Presidency. Put together, they revealed why half of ~~the~~ Viet Nam had fallen to the Communist leader Ho Chih Minh and the balance threatened despite the presence of a French Expeditionary Force of 300,000 men and the lavish expenditures of billions in American aid.

The case of the Vietnamese army was symptomatic of the whole. This army was trained by the French and equipped and supported by the United States. It was initially designed not

~~primarily~~ as an instrumentality of a free Vietnamese Government but as a

supplement to ^{the} French Expeditionary Corps to assist in holding back the

communist Viet Minh. Despite modern training and copious supply, it

failed to ^{serve} ~~serve~~ effectively even in this limited function. After the fighting

came to an end, moreover, it became a serious divisive force in south

Viet Nam. When Diem attempted to convert the army into an element

of national strength, the chief-of-staff, who ~~was~~ a Vietnamese of French

citizenship openly defied his orders. He ^{ignored and nullified the} ~~was controllable only by~~

^{President and would accept persuasion only} ~~commands~~ from the French Expeditionary Corps or those issuing

from Bao Dai in Cannes.

When Diem's 'stubbornness' forced the removal of the rebellious

chief-of-staff last November, the first step was taken in unravelling the

strands of the web which had held him a virtual prisoner in the presidential

Palace. He had in effect shifted the Vietnamese army from an independent

and obstructive position into one subordinate to his government. Had he

not been successful there would have been no opportunity to push a constructive

program in Viet Nam. The gulf which already separated the army from the Vietnamese people could only have grown larger. In the end, this force would

have in all probability degenerated into an oppressive war-lordism and by

further alienating the people paved the way for the triumph of the ^{Communist} Viet

Minh throughout the country.

^{with} Diem's challenge came from the Binh Xuyen and the sects,

particularly the Hoa Hao. The Binh Xuyen was literally a government

within the government. It was the organized brotherhood of the corrupt

and the lawless in and around Saigon-Cholon. Backed by regular armed

bands, it had grown powerful on extortion, the drug traffic, gambling

and other questionable activities. By breaking its ties with the communists

who had previously bought it off, the Binh Xuyen had risen to a

^{official} position of quasi-respectability at least in Colonial circles. Although

the organization continued to tap the revenues of illicit occupations,

its leaders became pillars of strength in ^{the Saigon} government. Its leader ^{for a time} even served as president before Diem, ~~and his son was the rebellious chief of staff of the army.~~

When Diem came to power, Bao Dai took the precaution of placing control of the police ~~power~~ and the national gendamerie in the hands of the Binh Xuyen. It became, therefore, ^{at once} the principal enforcer and breaker of the law in Saigon-Cholon.

What the Binh Xuyen was to ^{the metropolis south Viet Nam,} ~~Saigon-Cholon~~, the Hoa Hao was to the countryside. Their armed bands, supported by subsidies from Saigon and by exactions from the peasants held the villages in a state of acquiescent terror.

Previous governments in Saigon had made ^{or} their peace with these groups by buying them ^{off} doing nothing to curb their predatory activities, or by entering into open alliance with them.

~~Leaders of the Binh Xuyen and Hoa Hao were often members of the cabinets which preceded Diem.~~ Having little support among the

people, the succession of ineffective governments in Saigon had to rely increasingly on these oppressors of the people to preserve even the fiction of ruling. The more they relied on them, the more they *separated themselves from* ~~alienated~~ the people.

When Diem began to call a halt to the patronizing of the Binh Xuyen and the sects, he was called "inexperienced" and "uncompromising". When he closed the gambling casinos in Saigon-Cholon on which the Binh Xuyen relied for a large part of its revenue, he was called a "mad man". When he cut off the subsidies to the sects, it was "the end".

Diem ignored these criticisms and the repeated exhortations to compromise with the dissident groups. In the meantime he was strengthening the government's control over the Vietnamese army, command and persuading leading generals of the Cao Dai sect to join the nationalist cause. With the Hoa Hao and the Binh Xuyen

however, there could be no compromise. They would accept no arrangement which impaired their privileged position of autonomous power. Diem could not concede that and still expect to lead the Vietnamese people. *PP* Sensing their power slipping the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao launched a simultaneous rebellion in an effort to overthrow Diem in the spring of 1955. Bao Dai who had not dared to remove the President because of the latter's growing influence in Viet Nam and his support from the United States, made a circuitous attempt to aid the rebels. As soon as the revolution had broken out, he switched chiefs-of-staff of the army in order to prevent the government from dealing with the outbreak. For 24 hours Diem's fate hung in balance. In the end, however, Bao Dai's action was ignored. The army remained loyal to Diem and after a brief and bloody struggle *and the surrounding countryside* in the streets of Saigon-Cholon the revolt was crushed.

Both the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao were driven from the

capitol. The remnants of the Binh Xuyen fled to the swamps along the river some miles south of Saigon. It was from this area that they had originally emerged as river pirates to develop the ^{demimonde} organization that eventually held all Saigon-Cholon in its grasp. The Hao Hao retreated to the west. Broken into small bands, they took refuge in ~~the~~ remote mountains near the Cambodian borders.

The power of both of these dissident groups has been broken. ^{while they may} ~~When~~ they still retain a capacity for harrasing the government it is on the level of piracy and banditry. Both organizations are reported to be negotiating with the Viet Minh in an effort to recoup their shattered fortunes. If they are successful, however, it will be a measure of the ~~g~~rowing weakness of the communists not of their strength.

By accepting the "war of the sects", rather than ~~to~~ ^{permitting} a continuance of the antonomous power of the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa

Hao which was the price of peace, Diem lost the prop of several thousand armed mercenaries in the conflict with the communists. *However,*

in
~~A~~ giving tangible evidence of a leadership in Saigon that would act for and not against the people, he gained far more. He gained the loyalty of the national army. He gained the confidence of numerous Vietnamese who had been exploited and degraded by the Binh Xuyen, the sects and their accomplices among the French colons. He gained the respect of free foreign nations and even the communists who recognized that a dangerous opponent had appeared in Saigon.

In a recent plebescite in south Viet Nam, Diem's picture was placed in the ballot box and that of Bao Dai discarded by almost all of the 6 million people who voted. Before the election it was apparent that this would be the result. Bao Dai had long since lost any significant following if, in fact, he had ever had one in Viet Nam ^{and} ~~his~~ key role in the conspiracy to overthrow Diem ^(me) has been the last

straw. ^PWhat was implied in this election, however, was more important

than the actual confirmation of the Ex-Emperor's unpopularity. The

elevation of Diem to chief-of-state was an indication that the people

wanted a government which would derive its power primarily from them.

It was a reflection of their search for a leader ^{who} would respond to their

needs rather than to those of a foreign power and ~~those~~ native groups

allied with it. They sensed that Diem could provide that kind of

leadership. It is significant that not only Bao Dai but ^{he} Viet Minh as well ~~sought~~

~~to prevent the election.~~ ^{he} *opposed the plebiscite.*

Diem has come an incredible distance in less than two years.

He has taken what was a lost cause of freedom in Viet Nam and breathed new life into it. Until now, the principal challenge which has confronted him has been to sweep away the accumulated debris of a half-century of colonial inertia. That challenge has been met with great political skill.

The road ahead for Diem, however, is in some ways more difficult than the one he has already negotiated. At the present time, he weilds great personal power in south Viet Nam, comparable to that of Ho Chih Minh in the north. His principal task now is to translate this power into a people's power. He must lead in the construction of a free nation almost from the ground up and to do so under the constant pressure of the Viet ^{minh} ~~Nam~~.

The task involves in the first instance the development of new political institutions which will provide adequate channels of representation from the people to the government. Deposing Bao Dai has cleared the way for this effort and Diem has indicated that he will act promptly to

establish a constitutional government. The old opera house in Saigon is even now being refitted to house an elected constituent assembly when it is convened.

He has also shown an awareness of the need to tackle promptly the vast problems of economic and social reconstruction which exist in south Viet Nam. These affect primarily the people of the rural areas who constitute the great bulk of the population. Edicts have already been promulgated to alleviate the conditions of the farmers and now that the dissidents have been brought under control, it should be possible to carry them out with increasing effectiveness.

There is also the need to perfect the armed forces. The "war of the sects" indicated that there had been a vast improvement in the morale and leadership of the Army since Diem has been in office. Recent comments of General ^{John W.} ~~Mc~~ O'Daniel, head of the United States military mission at Saigon, also reflect very favorably on the national army. A need exists ^{however,} in Viet Nam, ^{has} as in most Asian countries, where men with weapons have long been associated with oppression to root the army deeply in the populace.

These are the principal challenges which confront the Diem government. There are others, including the development of a whole new set of attitudes and relationships with respect to foreign nations.


for Asians
It is not easy to pass quickly from the bitternesses engendered by

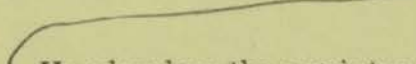
colonial dependency into new ties based upon national equality and

mutual benefit. Yet the need to do so in a world of sharp ideological

conflict is very great. *TP* In dealing with these problems Diem is no longer

alone. He has a growing following among young articulate Vietnamese

and increasing mass support. 

 He also has the assistance of the United States and other free nations. Before the Diem government came to power, American aid was probably more ineffective in Viet Nam than anywhere else in the world.

It is now a positive asset in the situation. It should be noted, however, that large-scale aid can be at best only a stop-gap, not only in Viet Nam but in any country where it is employed. The efforts of the people themselves must ultimately provide the key to genuine freedom. American

aid is not a panacea. It is helpful if it stimulates the constructive energies of the recipients. It can be wasteful and harmful if it serves to stifle those energies by building unnecessary reliance on this country. The Vietnamese have not removed their dependency on one foreign country only to shift it to another.

* ~~Resources exist in south Viet Nam which can supply the basis for an independent national existence if they are effectively utilized. The country is now in a difficult transition from a colonial to a free base and assistance from the United States can be of particular importance at this time provided it is consciously and intelligently designed to put a strong floor under Vietnamese independence.~~

~~In the long run, the free south is in a better position than the communist north to unify all of Viet Nam. Its advantage lies not only in a superiority of resources but in the fundamental difference between freedom and totalitarianism. While the north therefore is likely to come~~

* See next page

increasingly under the domination of communist China, ~~resources~~ ^R are available in Viet Nam which can supply the basis for an independent national existence if they are effectively utilized. The economy of the country, however, is now in a difficult transition from a colonial to an independent base. Assistance from the United States, therefore, can be of particular importance at this time. It must be designed consciously ^{however,} and intelligently ^{to} help put a strong economic floor under Vietnamese independence if it is to be useful.

The free south is potentially in a better position than the communist north to unify Viet Nam. Its advantage lies not only in a superiority of resources but in the fact that it is oriented towards freedom rather than totalitarianism. While the north is likely to come increasingly under the domination of communist China, the south can grow steadily more independent. In short, Diem's star is likely to remain in the ascendancy and that of Ho Chih Minh ^{to} ~~will~~ fade because the former is following a course which more closely meets the needs and aspirations of the Vietnamese people.

This likelihood may well explain the sense of urgency which the communists have exhibited on the question of unifying the country.

It may even lead them to attempt a military coup before it is too late.

If Diem continues to pursue the building of a free nation in south Viet Nam

with the same perceptiveness, courage and sure-handedness which he has

so far displayed, he will be ready for elections on unification when the

conditions for a free choice exist in Viet Nam. Will the Viet Minh be

willing to accept them at that time? It is doubtful, but if they do, it ~~will~~ ^{is likely}

to be Ngo Dinh Diem's picture that will go in the ballot box while that of

Ho Chih Minh is cast into the dust.